



NEWS RELEASE

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

BUILDING STRONG®

For Immediate Release:
June 21, 2011

Contact:
LaDonna Davis, (540) 678-6526
Ladonna.s.davis@usace.army.mil

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: Bridging the language gap to create a better Afghanistan

KABUL – Navy Lt. Cmdr. Joel VanEssen studied architecture in college with hopes of using his skills in the engineering field. But, in an unexpected twist of events, his aspirations took a sharp right turn in a field he had never even imagined. “As someone who went to school to study fields in math and science, learning a foreign language was something I never expected I’d do,” VanEssen said.

After college, the Navy recommended VanEssen for a program that teaches civilians and service members the local languages of where they would be deployed.

As a result VanEssen became one of the first graduating classes of the AfPak Hands or Afghanistan Pakistan Hands program. The goal of the program is to teach service members and civilians the local languages of Pakistan and Afghanistan so that they can communicate with locals and help build U.S. relationships with foreign countries.

The AfPak program is a Department of Defense initiative that started with the Obama administration after realizing that one of the most effective ways of relationship building is through language. “When an Afghan realizes that you know how to speak Dari, they just get the biggest smile on their face,” said VanEssen. “They want to test you, and push you, they want to know how much you know and they appreciate the fact that an American is reaching out to them in their own country speaking their language.”

Even though the AfPak Hands program is still in the infant stages for the United States, the history of such a program dates back to China in the 1940s when a group of service members, diplomats and journalists possessing knowledge of China came to be known as the “China Hands.” Now, the term “AfPak Hands” refers to a cadre of service members and civilians with language and cultural training focusing on regions in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Luckily for VanEssen, his training still led him to a career path of his choosing. He works for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan Engineer District-North in Kabul as the Kabul South Resident officer in charge. Here he uses his language skills to speak to high level Afghan officials and talk to project and site managers and local national construction workers on project sites.

In order to get through the AfPak program, military and civilians are put through a four month long intense training course that is taught at the Defense Language Institute in Rosselin, Va. There, students are taught at what is called level 1+ language skills in Pashtu, Dari or Urdu. Each student is expected to know how to carry on a basic conversation, know different greetings and how to speak local phrases.

Each AfPak Hands class member stays in the program for approximately four years. After combat and language school, they deploy for a year, they then return back to the states for a year to continue work in their field of study all the while continuing language courses and then deploy again for another year to the country and command they originally started with.

“The idea is to get the basics down and then come to theatre, get immersed in the culture and learn more as you go along,” said VanEssen.

AED-North currently has six AfPak Hands service members in country located at different field operating bases throughout northern Afghanistan. There are roughly 200 AfPak Hands members working throughout Afghanistan for various organizations and military units.

Air Force Maj. Jeremiah Hammill, the officer in charge for the Kabul Central resident office at AED-North started training for the AfPak program in July 2010. After seven months of combat training along with a six-month long language training course, he landed in Kabul a little more than two months ago and has been busy using his language skills ever since. “I work with a staff of about 41 local nationals and engineers and the language skills that I have learned have really helped me, not just communicate with them, but also foster relationships with them. It helps bridge the gap and gets us all on the same page when we can all speak the same language.”

Each student is taught the local language of the area that their command forecasts they will be placed. For Hammill that language was Dari. “The training we receive is very intense and very high speed,” Hammill said. “We had to learn about 35 vocabulary words every night and then use them the next day.”

But, in spite of the challenging workload, Hammill says the training he received has helped him become a better Airman and build better relationships with a country that does not always view the U.S. favorably. “We have a contracted security company that provides security for us when we go out on site visits and they are Afghans,” Hammill said. “When we’re in the car, we talk and teach each other and teach one another different words in our respective languages. One day I asked one of my security detail guys what the Afghan people think about Americans and he said, ‘the majority of Afghans are very happy with Americans’ here because we are helping to provide them

with opportunities, bettering their quality of life and providing them with jobs. But it's a fine line as it only takes one person to change that perspective, but the overall consensus is we're doing a good job."

Both VanEssen and Hammill agree that while the program teaches you the language skills, it's really what you make of it that makes the difference. "Everyone's tour is different, some people take the opportunity to learn a different language and culture and really get involved with the people to make a difference, and there are some that don't," VanEssen said.

Hammill has a similar point of view. "Unlike some units who are here to enforce, we are here to help and build relationships with the Afghan people. We want to show them that we mean goodwill towards them and not harm. When I go out on a project sites I interact with the children and shake the adult's hands because I want them to know that we are here to help and look at project sites, not disturb them."

The AfPak program helps build relationships between service members and Afghans, but it also gives the program members a chance to teach other AED-North employees about the Afghanistan cultural. Hammill says that there are many things that we do in America that just "isn't acceptable here in Afghanistan, such as pointing or telling an Afghan if they are doing something wrong in front of his peers." He says that by teaching civilian employees the cultural norms, it helps the Corps of Engineers to have a better relationship with the local nationals that work for them.

Army Maj. Thomas Fenoseff is getting ready to complete his first tour in Afghanistan with the AfPak Hands program. After a year in theatre working as the Jalalabad Area Office officer in charge, he will return to the states to work at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Headquarters in Washington, D.C. There he will continue taking language courses while working with the Corps. Fenoseff expects to return to Afghanistan within a year to continue with the AfPak program, something that he says is one of the great benefits of the program. "The great thing about joining this program is that I get to build relationships with these people. In a year I can come back to a project that is complete and talk to one of the Afghans I worked with and they will remember me, they will know that we did not just come to build and leave and that means something."

Fenoseff also says that what helped him build a better relationship with the Afghans is reading and understanding the Quran, a sacred Muslim book that is the central religious text of the Islamic religion. "Islam is so big in this culture," said Fenoseff. "In order to really understand these people you have to understand their culture and that's what this program has helped me accomplish. If you can bridge that communication gap, you are more

efficient. If you can talk to an Afghan and ask them what their problems are, what are their issues then it is easier to reach a solution and that's what the Corps of Engineers is here to do.

-30-



Maj. Thomas Fenoseff, center, talks with some Afghans during a ribbon cutting ceremony with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan Engineer District-North for an Afghan National Police station in Lal Por, Afghanistan. The language skills Fenoseff has learned as part of the AfPak Hands programs has allowed him to communicate effectively in Dari with project and site managers of USACE projects (photo by LaDonna Davis)